
TRANSITIONS: Coping with Change

Coping with Change

First sermon in series entitled: Transitions

Preached Sunday, April 6, 2008

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Text: Exodus 14:10-14

Theme: We all have a difficult time dealing with change but when we let God guide us and we trust in God's providential care we can use the time of transition as a creative time where we discover greater truths about ourselves.

The text that I have chosen for today reminds me of a great joke. Have you heard the story about President Bush going through the airport and encountering a man with long hair, wearing a long white robe and sandals, and holding a staff? Well it seems that President Bush went up to the man and said, "Aren't you Moses?"

The man never answered and just kept looking straight ahead. Convinced that this man was Moses the President yelled, "Moses!" in a loud voice. Again the man kept staring straight ahead, never even acknowledging the President. Now we know that when the President makes up his mind he is not going to be dissuaded so he pulls a secret service agent to his side and says, "Doesn't this man look like Moses to you? Don't you think this is odd?"

The Secret Service agent agreed that he did look very much like the biblical character, or at least what he remembered from Sunday School classes. "Well then," the President demanded, "go over and ask him what he is up to and if he is indeed Moses." So the agent walks over and whispers in the man in the white robe's ear, "Look my boss thinks you look like Moses, are you really him?"

The man slowly turned his head, looking in all directions, and said, "Yes, I am Moses, but you have to understand that the last time I talked with a bush I spent 40 years wandering in the desert and ended up leading my people to the only spot in the entire Middle East where there was no oil."

I am beginning a new sermon series today simply entitled "Transitions" but that is the only simple thing about it. Change is complicated and how we deal with it or in many cases how we don't deal with it can create all sorts of personal and interpersonal problems. Isn't it interesting that change is everywhere around us and we have to deal with it every day in some way – and yet most of us deal with it poorly. So in this series we are going to look at the difference between transition and change, the three-step process of transition, our preferred styles for handling change (and we all have a style whether we know it or not), and most importantly how God helps us in this process that is so unsettling.

In this five-week series we are first going to look at why we struggle so hard with change and have this love/hate relationship with the status quo. Then we are going to spend three weeks exploring William Bridges' three-step process of transition which starts with "Endings", then wandering in the middle ground which he calls the "neutral zone" but I will call the "wilderness" because we are biblically based, and finally moving to the third step which he labels "Beginning." Bridges has been one of the most quoted and knowledgeable authorities on transitions for years and I remember reading about him when I was a lay person in the 80s.

Finally on the fifth Sunday we will address the big transition that is happening in our church with my departure and with the new pastor taking over. I would like us to be as healthy as possible, looking for new possibilities, and trusting in God's care as we end this series.

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Throughout the series I will be relying heavily on two books by William Bridges but also on biblical stories involving change or the resistance to change. I believe this is a series that will benefit every one of us because change touches each of us every day of our lives.

So far in the sermon you have heard me refer to two words that we often use to mean the same thing – change and transition. But they are not really synonymous. Technically change is a situational shift. We change our clothes. We change jobs. We change houses. Having a new baby is a real change in our lives. Losing a loved one is a huge change.

Transition, on the other hand, deals with the way we come to terms with change.¹ Transition is the process we use in letting go of the old, wandering in the confusing in-between wilderness, and then (*ideally*) embracing a new beginning.

There are natural transitions in our lives that are built into the maturation process. Done properly we move seamlessly from infancy to adolescence to adulthood, to mid-life, and finally to our golden years. The problem is that it is not always seamless. Many of us get stuck in one of the stage transitions and we hear of people who “never grow up” or who will “always be a child” or who “are ready to retire and still going through their mid-life crisis.”

Then there are all sorts of situational changes in life that generate transitions. The list includes five broad categories starting with the loss of a relationship. We have all experienced this kind of loss whether it be a good friend moving, or the alienation of a former friend, to the loss of a pet, to the death of a loved one.

The next category is change in our home lives. This would include things like getting married, having a child, breaking up, retiring, changing jobs, moving, going to school, remodeling and the list goes on and you could add to this one.

The next category is personal changes which includes getting sick or getting well again, changes in lifestyles, changing habits, experiencing successes and failures and again the list goes on.

Then we have the fourth category of work and financial changes which includes changing jobs, being promoted or demoted, increasing or decreasing income, taking on new loans, etc. And the fifth category is inner change or things like spiritual awakenings, emotional breakdowns or enlightenments, changes in self image, or responding to God’s call.²

How many here have experienced at least one of these situational change triggers in the last month? How many have experienced at least one of these in the last week? A few years ago a pair of doctors got together and they started rating these triggers in terms of the stress they cause and they discovered a distinct correlation between accumulated change and physical and emotion illness. You pile a home remodel onto a change in job, or a loss of a good friend, and it could result in illness. Even though change is built into our natural life processes we don’t like it one bit.

Change is a paradox. Bridges writes in the opening chapter of his book, “The Way of Transition,” “To achieve continuity, we have to be willing to change. Change is, in fact, the only way to protect whatever exists, for without continuous readjustment the present cannot continue.”³ In other words the very things we love in the present – like our families, or marriages, our health, our careers, our homes, our church – are all primed for destruction if they don’t change over time.

But he goes on with another paradox. “The very things we now wish that we could hold onto and keep safe from change were themselves originally produced by changes. No matter how solid and comfortable and necessary the status quo feels today, it was once new, untried, and uncomfortable.

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Change is not only the path ahead, but it is also the path behind us, the one which we traveled along to wherever we are now trying to stay.”⁴

Because we all have this paradoxical love/hate relationship with change and because it is something we have to deal with so often in our lives we all have a “preferred style” of behavior to either protect us from change or to allow us to embrace change. Let me describe some styles of behavior and see if you can identify yours. Some of us like to deny it. I call this one the “I-am-going-to-buy-a-yurt-in-Montana-and-live-without-any-television” technique. I will be honest that there are some days when I watch the evening news and I witness what is now acceptable behavior and I want my yurt.

Another style is fighting it. I call this one the “that’s-not-the-way-we-have-done-it-and-as-long-as-I-have-breath-in-my-lungs-I-am-going-to-fight-it” style. I actually prefer this style to its dysfunctional sister which is passive-aggressive fighting. I call that one “before-I-accept-that-change-I-am-going-to-make-you-crawl-over-broken-glass-but-I-will-be-smiling-and-saying-how-sorry-I-am-for-your-struggle.” I will have to say this is unfortunately one of the more popular styles of dealing with change.

Oh there are others like avoiding change, dismissing it, complaining about it so loud that it never happens, ganging up on change or the change agent, or manipulating change. Did you find your favorite style in there?

Let me tell you one of my favorite stories in the Old Testament that illustrates our reluctance to change. In the scripture read this morning we hear about the Israelites who have been in captivity finally being freed by Moses. For generations the Israelites had been slave to the Egyptians and had been the forced labor for the Pharaoh’s various building projects. All the while they were making bricks for the Pharaoh they complained and dreamed about the day when they would be liberated from their oppression.

The day finally arrives. They march out of Egypt and I imagine they are celebrating with each mile they put between themselves and their painful past. But then the unimaginable happens. They encounter a major obstacle – the Red Sea. They are trapped in their own limited thinking and they look back and they see a dust cloud rising. It can only mean one thing – the chariots are coming. I can guarantee you this is not where they bust singing “Good news the chariots are coming” because this was bad news. It meant death or captivity again.

So what do they do? They start complaining. I love their words because they are the words used over and over again by humankind whenever fear overcomes trust. “Was it not for the lack of graves in Egypt that you brought us out here in the desert to die? Moses, what have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you would happen? (ah I hear some passive aggressiveness rearing its head). Let us alone. Let us go back and serve the Egyptians. For it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”⁵

At least we knew what to expect. Even though we hated the Egyptians we didn’t hate them that much. Even though we complained endlessly about making bricks at least we knew what to expect. Even though we cursed the status quo it looks really good right now.

The Israelites are standing on the banks of change. Their future lies on the other side if they have the courage and the trust to embrace the journey. But the chariots of uncertainty, fear, and painful memories of the past are bearing down upon them and they lose hope. Have you been there? Have you ever complained about the status quo, or a situation that was abusive and unbearable and then you were offered a way out and you froze? It happens to us all. It is that dangerous ledge of change where the past – as abusive as it was – still looks better than uncertainty. It is that disorienting ledge of transition where our fears of what could be overpower our knowledge of what is and we surrender.

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Have you been there? Perhaps you are in an abusive marriage, or abusive work environment, or in a relationship where someone mistreats you constantly and you want it to change – but change means stepping into the unknown.

Have you been there? Perhaps you are stuck in a job that you hate, or a relationship that is going nowhere, or a family situation demands confrontation, correction, and change. But the “what ifs” outnumber the “what is’s” and you stay locked in place.

Have you ever been there? Perhaps you have lost a loved one recently, or you have lost something dear to you like a job, your health, or your image of what the future might hold for you. You are so hurt, wounded, and disoriented that you don’t want to risk another dream, another relationship, another extension of yourself and so you withdraw. Do you know what I mean?

I was there many years ago and this text helped me through. Many of you have heard me tell the story of my call to ministry so I am not going to give you the full version but the Readers’ Digest super condensed version. Carol and I struggled for years with my call. It was an interesting dance where I would hear God’s call and tell Carol of my desire to go to seminary and she would promptly say no. I came to rely on her part in the dance and truth be known never thought she would ever say yes. But then came the day that she did and all my complaining, all my bold statements about following God’s call, and all my promises about dropping my possessions and career suddenly exposed. It was time to walk my bold talk and my knees started knocking.

When she said, “Go for it” I felt the joy of liberation as well as fear of the uncertainty that stretched out before us. In the next few days after Carol gave me permission to go to seminary my work environment suddenly changed. I told my boss of my intentions to quit and pursue another career and he offered me more money and more power. Things started looking really good in Egypt.

The landscaping of the backyard was finally done, the long awaited deck was complete, our children had just made new friends and didn’t want to leave, and Carol’s had just gotten a better position in her job. Egypt was looking better and better and our knees were knocking so much that we didn’t know if we could make the next step on the journey. I remember calling one of my best friends who happened to be a pastor and I told him what was going on. I remember saying I can’t do it because I didn’t have enough faith.

The phone was silent for a minute or two and finally he said, “I want you to remember the story of the Israelites standing on the banks of the Red Sea. You are standing there with them and Egypt is looking pretty good only because you are so fearful of taking the next step. But what does God do? He says, ‘Do not be afraid,’ and ‘Keep your eyes up the pillar of cloud and I will lead you.’ So David do not be afraid and keep your eyes upon God and God will provide the holy ground on which to walk.”

My friends I am here to testify, God did provide, God does provide, God always provides when we trust and when we have the courage to step out. Each of us in this room either has, is, or will be soon standing on the banks of change. Each of us will hear the chariots of the past coming. Each of us will look off into the sea of uncertainty and be filled with fear. But hear the good news. God is not going to abandon us. Do not be afraid of change. God will provide the safe ground, the holy ground, the sacred ground on which we will walk and not perish.

¹ Bridges, William *“The Way of Transition,”* Da Capo Press, Cambridge, MA, 2001. p3.

² Bridges, William, *“Transitions: Making sense of Life’s Changes”* Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading, MA 1980. p23

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³ Bridges, p1

⁴ Bridges, p1-2

⁵ Exodus 14:11-12 (my interpretation of the text)